

Moderator's Message for Special Town Meeting, November 2022 (Part 2)

Residents of Bedford,

There are several procedural topics to keep in mind as we all prepare for Special Town Meeting on November 14.

Our open town meetings are our legislative process. Registered voters act on our bylaws, appropriate funds and consider general town business. Our meeting procedures rest on a variety of state laws, the Bedford Charter and Bylaws, a reference guide called Town Meeting Time, and our practices at previous Town Meetings. Many details about the rules and how town meeting works are available on the [Town's website](#).

Town Meetings are business meetings of the Town and as such, proper behavior must be maintained. Attendees are expected to adhere to the Town's Guidelines for Civil Discourse. Clapping, cheering or booing are not allowed at the meetings. Speakers must be respectful of each other and the professional staff that are present. Speakers must speak to the motion at hand, and their comments and questions must be directed to the motion. Personal comments directed at people, or characterizations of groups, organizations or other individuals will not be tolerated.

The Town Moderator is charged with conducting the proceedings at town meeting within the Town's rules and under their authority as Moderator. For example, no one may speak unless recognized by the Moderator and all questions must be directed through the Moderator.

Motions on the Articles contained in the warrant are made by the sponsors of the Articles. During the debate, amendments to a motion may be made. Amendments must be provided in writing and accepted by the Moderator. There is no set amount of time for debating motions. Sometimes it is clear that the questions and discussion are done, no one is asking to be recognized and we can move to a vote. Other times, extensive discussion has happened, attendees may start to repeat the points made by other speakers and some attendees are ready to vote even if others aren't. This may lead a speaker to make a motion to move the question. A motion to move the question requires a two thirds majority to pass and is not debatable or amendable.

The decision whether to accept a motion to move the question is not always straightforward. People may still be at the microphones, answers to questions may still be pending, new information may still be available. It is within the Moderator's authority to not accept a motion to move the question if they believe Town Meeting voters will benefit from additional debate. As Moderator, I reserve the right to not accept a motion to move the question if I am convinced that Town Meeting will benefit from not doing so.

Secret ballots allow residents to vote privately on a motion and in controversial cases some voters find this preferable. Bedford's rules do not require secret ballots for any votes at a

Town Meeting. Any resident can, however, move to hold a secret ballot, and by majority vote, it can be required. If adopted, secret ballots allow every Town Meeting attendee to receive and cast a paper ballot in ballot boxes supervised by the Town Clerk.

Some articles are discussed and debated extensively prior to Town Meeting in public meetings, conversations, letters to the editor and online. Article 10 Minuteman Bikeway Extension is a good example. Many people have expressed that this article lends itself to a secret ballot at Town Meeting due to the controversy surrounding the project, the degree of emotion felt by residents on both sides of the issue and the desire for privacy in voting.

I am sufficiently convinced that Town Meeting will benefit from using a secret ballot to vote on Article 10. In consultation with Town Counsel, and within my authority as Town Moderator, I will call for a secret ballot as the method of voting on Article 10.

Bedford has a long tradition of coming together respectfully at Town Meeting. How we conduct ourselves there reflects on our town as a whole. I have heard from many people that they are worried about the tone, tenor and temperature of the interactions going on regarding town activities, projects and business. I hope you will join with me in participating at Special Town Meeting in ways that reflect well on our ability to make decisions, treat each other respectfully and continue to support the work we do together.

Mark Siegenthaler
Town Moderator